

MAURITANIA (TIER 2 - WATCH LIST)

Mauritania is a source and destination country for men, women, and children trafficked for the purpose of forced labor. Although slavery was officially outlawed in 1980, vestiges of slavery remain, particularly in remote areas of the country, flowing from ancestral master-slave relationships inherited from one generation to the next. This relationship, though one of unequal status, can be likened, at times, to that of family, with the physical needs of the slave provided for, even into old age, in exchange for work performed. Instances of traditional slavery—defined as not receiving payment for work performed and being prohibited from leaving one's situation—reportedly exist, but are becoming less frequent as the population becomes increasingly less nomadic and more urbanized. However, these relationships have long been engrained in the collective mindset and are difficult to transform. Former slaves, though legally free, cannot realistically leave their situation, as they are uneducated and have no personal assets or marketable skills. Without viable work options, there is little possibility of economic independence and the traditional interdependence is perpetuated.

An official Department visit to Mauritania was conducted in March 2004 to gain a better understanding of the social complexities surrounding alleged vestiges of slavery. This investigation neither conclusively confirmed nor denied the continued practice of traditional forms of slavery.

A relatively small number of Mauritanian boys, almost always from Pulaar and related tribes, are sent to cities to work and to receive Koranic instruction under the tutelage of a marabout for whom they are forced to beg, sometimes in excess of 12 hours a day. Such boys, known as talibe, also come from Senegal, Mali, and Niger. While some marabouts provide comprehensive Koranic instruction, others have taken advantage of the tradition to run networks of forced child beggars. There are unconfirmed reports of child prostitution networks.

The Government of Mauritania does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. Mauritania appears on the report this year as the result of newly available information indicating it has a significant trafficking problem. It has been placed on Tier 2 Watch List for failing to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat trafficking. The government should manifest its commitment to eliminating slavery by vigorously publicizing the new anti-trafficking law and any convictions stemming from the law, particularly in remote sections of the country and among vulnerable population groups such as illiterate adults, Black Moors, and the economically destitute. It should also provide education for civil society on labor rights, including forced labor and child prostitution. Economic and social programs must be developed to integrate former slaves into society, and a grassroots awareness-raising campaign should be launched to educate them on their rights, freedoms, and opportunities.

Prosecution

The government passed the Law Against Human Trafficking in July 2003 that prohibits non-remunerated work, forced labor, and exploitation for prostitution. Penalties include five to ten years of forced labor and a substantial fine. To publicize the new law, the government ran radio, television, and newspaper campaigns in French, Arabic, and Pulaar in both July and December 2003. A later campaign, which focused on the legal context of the trafficking law, ran in early September. The government has not prosecuted any cases against traffickers under the new law.

Protection

The government does not provide victim protection services. In 2003, the human rights commission provided a small number of descendents of former slaves, known as Haratines, with vocational training via mobile centers sent to remote areas.

Prevention

The government took no action in 2003 to prevent trafficking.